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TREATMENT OF THE SICK IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS[1]

114 121 During a residence of twelve months among the Melanesians of the north-western Solomon Islands, I had frequent opportunities of watching the natives treat one another for various forms of illness, and of collecting specimens of the plants and other substances which constitute their materia medica. The purpose of this paper is to place on record information given me by the natives themselves. No attempt will be made to deal with the subject from the standpoint of the medical practitioner, a task for which I am not qualified.

114 126 My information was obtained chiefly from the villages of Kurtatchi and Tabut, on the north coast of Bougainville. It was recorded verbatim in the local dialect, and a sample of each plant was collected at the same time. Unfortunately the incompleteness or imperfect preservation of many specimens rendered their identification impossible. Many of the prescriptions were given by more than one individual independently, or the technique might be the same while the plants differed. For some of the commoner ailments, people seemed to have their own favourite remedies, as do country folk in England. Some of these are secret and were imparted to me in private, others appear to be widely known.

754 757 It is sometimes said that primitive people regard every kind of sickness as the result of black magic. No one could be more conscious, or more terrified, of the power of black magic, which he calls "bad medicine" or "poison," than is the Solomon Islander, and he is not slow to ascribe his misfortunes to the machinations of some ill-disposed person who has "made poison"

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[1] This paper is based on data collected between Sept. 1929 and Oct. 1930 on the islands of Buka and Bougainville, the most north-westerly of the Solomon group. I am indebted to the committee for research on problems of sex, National Research Council, Washington, D.C., for the opportunity of studying these primitive people, to the experts at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, for the identification of my botanical specimens, and to Prof. C. G. Seligman for useful comments.

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against him. But, as will be seen, there are certain conditions for which what we might term natural causes are regarded as sufficient explanation. In either case, whatever is done to combat the disease is looked upon as entirely comparable to the procedure employed to ensure success in procuring food or in making love. Any substance—usually, but not always, some portion of a plant—employed in either connexion is known as *ăto*, which, in accordance with what I believe to be the native point of view, I have uniformly translated "medicine." Anyone who knows the appropriate medicine may treat a patient. The "prescriptions" are usually learned from a near relative: father, mother or mother's brother. This knowledge is not necessarily, though it may be, possessed by individuals who are skilled in "making medicine" for other purposes.

Fractures and Sprains

A sprain or a strained muscle is described by the same term as a fracture (*takok* = broken). I met one man (at Petats, an islet off the west coast of Buka) and three women (at Kurtatchi) who were known for their skill in such cases. They treated patients of both sexes, except persons to whom they stood in certain taboo relationships which prohibited physical contact. The following procedure is typical:

Ketar, a young woman, strained her shoulder by carrying too heavy a load of taro. I watched her being treated by Pari, an elderly woman, who subsequently gave me details of the secret mixture she used, asking me not to tell any of the other natives. This mixture (*rŏm*) consisted of the pulped roots of a plant called *tengnamani* (*Justicia* sp.) mixed with a quantity of *oin* (a red powder, a variety of iron oxide, much used in this region for various magical purposes) and stirred into sea water. Pari has taught the secret to her sister's son, together with the method of using the mixture. At Tabut the root of *wamŏmŏ* (*Erythrina*, the "coral tree") is used in the same manner. When it was ready she took up her lime pot and, putting it close to her mouth, called softly, many times, "Pispoa, Pispoa, Pispoa." Pispoa is the name of the spirit of a man who, when he was alive, was successful with this treatment. Pispoa then came and

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752 stayed inside the lime pot, making the lime powerful. Pari mixed some of this lime with the *rŏm* she had previously prepared. Taking some of this mixture in her hands, she massaged Ketar's side and shoulder, keeping her fingers spread wide apart and applying considerable pressure, with their tips, in a grasping movement, her wrist pressed against the patient's skin. She also manipulated the left breast with both hands. Ketar groaned frequently. Then Pari took a piece of flexible cane painted black on one side, passed it across her palm containing the *rŏm* mixture, smearing the unpainted side, and gave it to Ketar, who tied it tightly round her chest, just below her breasts, smeared side inwards. Then she got up from the verandah on which she had been lying and walked with some difficulty over to her own hut.

A young man came to me one day with a piece of cane tied very tightly round his chest, just below the armpits. He said he had "broken here" (putting his finger just below his left clavicle) while carrying heavy loads from his hut in the old village to the new one. He was being treated by another woman. She massaged him with powdered lime only, calling on several *urar* (spirits of the dead) as she worked. The words used were: "*Sawē, Malia, Kerep* (names of *urar*), *tar no ma pa* (look at) *takok* (broken (bone, limb, etc.)) *nen wasum ia* (and fasten it)." Massage was continued for several days, during which time he continued to wear the piece of cane tied round his chest. He then said he was all right again.

A dislocated joint (*tapatsik*) is reduced by manipulation.

Skin Diseases

164 That there is a great deal of skin disease among these people is obvious upon the most casual inspection. There was hardly a native in the village of Kurtatchi who was not affected in some form or other. Several varieties are distinguished by native names and are differently treated.

164 757 Yaws (*Framboesia tropica*, native name *pukpuk*). Every child, without exception, suffers from yaws during infancy. It occurs generally during the second year and lasts for several months, during which the child becomes very emaciated, but

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picks up rapidly when the lesions have healed. Its appearance is expected and marks the end of the period of taboo on cohabitation following childbirth. Various methods of treatment are in use. The young leaves of *burustē* (*Eranthemum* sp.) are rubbed over the child's skin; they must afterwards be thrown away. Scrapings from the bark from the trunk of *katsian*, a wild species of areca-palm, are boiled with scraped coconut meat and given to the child to eat. A bundle of leaves of *kort* (*Terminalia catappa*, the Indian almond) is heated in the embers and laid on the sores. [These leaves contain tannin. In India " the juice of young leaves is employed to prepare an ointment for scabies, leprosy and other cutaneous diseases " (Nādkarni, p. 843).]

I saw no adult with the ordinary form of yaws, but adults frequently suffer from sores on the sole of the foot (*tōkapits*), which correspond to the descriptions given in medical treatises of " crab-yaws," a secondary lesion. They cause great pain on walking. One man would sometimes hobble round the village howling. He used to collect the hard dry mud from the nest of a species of ant, crumble it into half a coconut shell, add some smouldering embers, and blow on it till it smoked. Then he covered it up with the upper half of the coconut shell, in which one of the " eyes " had been pierced, so that the smoke from the smouldering mixture came out of the hole. He held his foot in the smoke as long as he could bear it and said that it gave him considerable relief. Another method of treatment is to soak the flowers of *bubuwiar* (a variety of nettle, *Fleurya interrupta*) in sea water, add powdered lime, and rub this mixture into the sore.

Tropical ringworm (*Tinia imbricata*, native name *ukisas*) is very prevalent. It is not considered a disease, no cause is known for it, and no remedies are used. The natives say that it does not hurt and that they do not take any notice of it, but they pick at the scales a good deal. A healthy person will pick scales from the skin of an infected one, apparently as a way of passing the time. Some people seemed to regard the patterns made by the scaly patches on the skin as an ornament.

Scabies (itch, native name *kuskus*). Nearly every adult carries the lesions characteristic of this disease, some being almost entirely covered by them.

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757 almost entirely covered by them. It is disliked and several methods of treating it are practised. The usual method is to
[278] boil certain leaves, among them *kokui* (*Eragrostis tenella*) and *rarakot* (*Desmodium adhaerens*), to which must be added some bark and some scraped coconut meat; the resulting mash must be eaten by the patient, who then rubs his hand, greasy from carrying the mixture to his mouth, over the sores.

752 Ulcers and septic sores (generic word *pi*) are very common.
278 The smallest lesion of the skin is almost certain to become in-
[164] fected. They say that the sap of *wirtsun* (the inedible bush banana), if rubbed in at once, will prevent a cut from becoming a sore, but if the cut is deep this is not done, because it is too painful! The most general form of treatment is to chew the leaves or root of certain plants with the betel-mixture (areca-nut, lime and betel-pepper, as chewed for pleasure) and spit the resulting mash on to the sore. Among the medicines used in this manner are the root of *takuruts*, a species of Croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*), and the root of *tui* (*Calophyllum* sp.). Sometimes heated leaves, sprinkled with lime, are rubbed over the sore, or their sap is squeezed on to it. The bundle of leaves must then be put up in the rafters. As it dries in the smoke of the fire below, the sore will dry up; if it is thrown away before healing is complete, the sore will break out again. Of several plants thus used, only one is identifiable, *sipsip* (*Pteris ensiformis Burm.*). The bark of the Indian almond (*Terminalia catappa*), stated by Dymock (p. 262) to possess astringent qualities, may be pounded in sea water and squeezed on to the sore. The sap from the leaves of *wuruts*, the native tobacco plant, is sometimes squeezed over a sore to keep the flies away from it.

Boils (*tsub*, *patsuk*) are supposed to be caused by the blood stopping in the skin. They are treated by applying hot leaves, by pressure, and by spitting over the affected area a mash made by chewing portions of various plants with the betel-mixture.
[171] Among the plants thus used are *towano* (*Achryanthes aspera*), which is used in Australia (Maiden, p. 150) and in India (Dymock, p. 538) for treating cutaneous diseases, and *mansisian*, a species of betel-pepper. The leaves of betel-pepper are used in India "as a ready dressing for foul ulcers, which seem to im-

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prove under them" (Dymock, p. 600, quoting from Dutt's *Hindu Materia Medica*). 752 278

For burns, the leaves of *rakot* (*Oldenlandia paniculata*) are squeezed between the hands and the juice allowed to drop on to the burnt skin. The burn may also be painted with *oin*, and I have seen sea water poured over it.

Warts (*pisis*) are attributed to the fact that one of the food taboos has been broken. A small boy who was badly affected was said to have brought them on himself by eating sugar-cane, which is taboo to little children. Nothing is done for them. 753

Two prescriptions in my list apply to spear or arrow wounds. The bruised leaves of *wiakun* (*Wedelia biflora*) are heated, and the sap squeezed on to the wound "to make it heal quickly." If the head of the arrow remains embedded, the roots of *pupuna* (*Dryopteris Milneana* or *truncata*) are chewed with the betel-mixture and the saliva spat on to the wound. They say that this makes the arrow-head go further in so that the wound will heal over it, that its presence does no harm, and that healing is painless. 752 273

Affections of the Internal Organs

Next to those dealing with skin diseases, the largest number of prescriptions in my collection concerns various conditions which appear to be disturbances of the digestive system, though the descriptions are often so vague that it is difficult to be sure exactly what is meant. 757

"If a person has eaten something bad" he is given the scraped root of *wakop* chewed with the betel-mixture. Swallowing this is said to induce vomiting. An emetic prepared in the same manner from the root of *wamut* is given for stomach-ache. Unfortunately, neither of these trees could be identified, but I have included them as evidence that the use of the emetic is known to these natives.

Indigestion is attributed to eating too much or unsuitable food. Certain articles of food are avoided by some individuals for this reason, even, occasionally, their greatest delicacy, pig's fat. A pain "running from side to side" is said to be caused by eating hot taro at the same time as cold taro. Often no treatment is [753]

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757 given and "by and bye the pain goes away." "*Komanē to kamits non*" ("My belly hurts") is a complaint frequently heard. The following methods of treatment are typical of their class:

757 278 "Make a bundle of the leaves of *mansisian* (a wild pepper, not that commonly chewed with areca-nut) and heat it in the fire. Make a little hole in the bottom of the bundle and blow through the bundle on to the place where the pain is. Then chew the root with the betel-mixture, undo the bundle, spit the chewed mass into it, wrap it up again and rub the patient's belly."

"Chew the roots of *karawinoa* (*Eranthemum whartonianum*) with the betel-mixture and spit on to the patient's belly. Put the chewed mass up in the rafters of the hut and leave it there. If you throw it away the pain will come back."

"Rub between your hands the leaves of *tengnamani* (*Justicia* sp.), add lime, and make them into a bundle. Heat this on the fire, but do not leave it there too long. Undo it, and with the leaves in your hands rub the belly, pushing downwards. Then do the leaves up into a bundle again and put it in the smoke in the rafters. As it dries, the pain will be eased."

[164 753] Constipation (*watob*) is very prevalent. No cause is known for it, but it does not seem to be ascribed to "poison." Most of the prescriptions involve the massaging of the patient's abdomen, "to send the faeces down and make them come out." Medicine is also given by the mouth, either as a mash chewed with betel-mixture or as a drink. The following is interesting as showing that these people are acquainted with the principle of the suppository: "Chew the roots of *garian* (a species of Calamus) with the betel-mixture, spit the mash on to your hand and push some of it up into the patient's bowel. Chew another mouthful, spit it out, and put it into half a coconut shell. Pour some water over it and keep it in the house. If it is thrown away the medicine will not act."

[753 164] Diarrhoea (*tasokokoman*) is also common, and is ascribed to the eating of too much fat or greasy food. The remedies are usually leaves and roots chewed with the betel-mixture and swallowed by the patient. Massage with the chewed root of *wiakun* (*Wedelia biflora*) is also recommended.

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Dysentery (*tasoa*) is regarded as the result of "poison." It is diagnosed by the presence of blood in the faeces. It appears often in a mild form, from which the patient generally recovers. In the early stages it is treated with *wiakun* in the same way as diarrhoea. In severe cases, a drink is given, consisting of the bruised leaves of *riro* (*Morinda citrifolia*) steeped in water mixed with powdered lime. The leaves of this plant are used medicinally in Fiji (Seemann, p. 129). In India a decoction is made of them for the treatment of diarrhoea, and they are also administered as a tonic and febrifuge (Dymock, p. 335).

The passing of blood with the urine is treated in the following manner: "Rub a quantity of the grass *manini* (a sweet-scented grass, *Cymbopogon* sp.) between your hands, mix it with water, then take out the grass and give the water to the patient to drink. Then chew the roots with the betel-mixture and massage the lower part of the patient's abdomen vigorously with the resulting mash in the palm of your hand. The patient must also chew some of the root with the betel-mixture and swallow it."

Fever

There is a good deal of fever, chiefly malaria. It is usually considered to be caused by getting wet and cold, and only very rarely connected with black magic. Both external and internal treatment is given. Typical prescriptions run as follows:

The leaves of *toankenon* (one of the *Rutaceae*) or of several other plants are rubbed between the hands and placed in half a coconut shell filled with water, to which hot stones have been added. The top half of the coconut is replaced, with an "eye" pierced through which the steam will escape. The patient must hold his face in the steam and sniff at it.

When the fever is only just beginning, some freshly picked leaves of any one of various aromatic plants (unidentified) are rubbed in the hands and held to the nose of the patient, who must sniff at them. For later stages of the fever a package must be made of the leaves, heated in the fire, and then unfastened and held to the patient's nose; the leaves, held in the clenched fist, must then be pressed firmly on the patient's head in different places.

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757 For internal use, a decoction is prepared by steeping certain
[278] leaves in water, which is then drunk by the patient. Only one of several plants named in this connexion could be identified, *kabku* (*Scleria lithosperma*).

Children's Diseases

They fear very much for their children a sickness called *mēmim*, in which a thick yellow coating appears on the tongue
[753] which may choke the child. It is thought to be caused by someone who wishes to injure the child's parents, out of jealousy or other cause, making "bad medicine" to bring about the child's death. For treatment, certain leaves are rubbed between the hands and steeped in water to make a drink. Six different plants were named, none of which could be identified from my pressed specimens.

[753] Another affection peculiar to children is called *bin*. It reduces the child to skin and bone. It is supposed to occur when the child's mother has failed to observe the food taboos appropriate
[278] to the period of lactation. To treat it, scrapings of the bark of a mango tree (*bē*) are mixed with lime in a little water and rubbed on the child's abdomen.

[753] Failure on the part of the mother to keep the food taboos may also result in the child getting the sickness *kabets*, which is thus described: "It fastens the child's neck, and then goes into
[828] his belly and makes him die." (The word here translated "die" is used of temporary unconsciousness as well as of actual death, it being thought that the person dies and comes back to life again when he recovers consciousness. Wailing begins as if for the dead, to cease abruptly when the patient comes round.) A child whom I saw, said to be suffering from *kabets*, had convulsions. His grandmother massaged his body with a yellow liquid made by soaking in water the bruised leaves of the tree *papets* (unidentified). As she continually dipped her hands covered with powdered lime into the bowl, its contents gradually thickened. She called my attention to this, saying it was the sickness coming out of him.

757 When a child's head is hot with fever it is washed with water
278 in which the leaves of *obōb* (Hibiscus) have been soaking.

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A child who is always ailing is thought to be strengthened by being rubbed all over with water containing the leaves of *roabē* (*Desmodium adhaerens*). 757 278

Local Pain

A very general complaint is of "pains in the skin," which seem to be of a rheumatic nature. They are treated by tying a piece of fibre tightly round the place where the pain is greatest, and by rubbing the skin over the site of the pain with a mash made by chewing the leaves, roots or bark of any one of a number of specified trees or plants (all unidentified).

For pain in the back the bark of *winoa* (Canarium almond) is scraped, mixed thoroughly with hot water, and rubbed on the back. The bark of this tree exudes a resinous gum which is stated by Nāḍkarṇi (p. 153) to be stimulant and rubefacient. It may therefore be of use in this connexion as a counter-irritant.

Headaches are frequent, especially a pain between the eyes (*weswios*), which is attributed to the sun burning the eyes. As a rule, the sufferer first binds a piece of fibre tightly round his head. He may then hold his head over the smoke of *gartan* (*Calamus* sp.) leaves mixed with powdered lime, or pour over his head water in which the leaves of *kahariuk* (*Selaginella flabellata*) are soaking, or rub his forehead with a bundle of the leaves of *mansisian* (*Piper* sp.) into which a little lime has been sprinkled. The crushed leaves of another variety of *Selaginella* (*S. imbricata*) are used in India as a local application to the head for the relief of headache (Nāḍkarṇi, p. 237) and the leaves of a species of *Piper* "are applied to the temples in headache for relieving pain" (Dymock, p. 600, quoting from Dutt's *Hindu Materia Medica*). [753] [164]

In some of the prescriptions it is necessary to collect the leaves after treatment and hang them up in the rafters. As they dry, the pain will disappear. When the cure is complete, the leaves are thrown away into the sea. 755

Ear Troubles

The usual treatment for earache is to take the leaves and root of the plant *togoro* (unidentified), rub them to a pulp, and put this into the ear. 757

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For an insect in the ear the root and stem-sheath of *gartan* (*Calamus* sp.) are chewed with *wiwi*, a small variety of areca-nut, and *tsutsun*, the leaf of a wild pepper. The mixture is made into a bundle, wrapped up in *gartan* leaves and pushed into the ear, and is supposed to make the insect come out. The prescription ends: "Then you must catch it and show it to everybody."

Toothache

The roots of certain plants (unidentified) are chewed with the betel-mixture and the resulting mash is pressed against the aching tooth. These people seem to suffer a good deal from toothache, and many, even when quite young, lose teeth through disease.

Throat Troubles

For sore throat, the root of *wanis* (*Paspalum conjugatum*) is chewed with the betel-mixture and the mash given to the patient to swallow, or the leaf of *obŏb* (Hibiscus) may be steeped in water to make a drink. For external use, the leaves of *tengnamani* (*Justicia* sp.) are made into a bundle, heated, and soaked in water. The patient drinks the water and the hot, wet leaves are rubbed on his throat.

If an object, such as a fish-bone, sticks in the throat, it is pushed down by massaging the outside of the throat with a mash made by chewing scrapings from the root of *karawinoa* (*Eranthemum whartonianum*). To ease the soreness, the patient swallows a lump of the already chewed mash.

For a cough, the patient is given a drink made by soaking in water the bruised leaves of any one of a number of different plants. The only identifiable specimen is Hibiscus, the leaves of which are mucilaginous (Maiden, p. 132), so the decoction may actually have a soothing effect.

Swellings

For a swelling behind the ear, take the leaves of *drangi*, hold them in the smoke, then press them hard against the swollen part. This will cause the swelling to go down. To send it to another person, get more leaves of the same plant and throw them in his direction: the swelling will go to him and you will be free from it.

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A swollen leg is rubbed with the chewed root of *towano* (*Achryanthes aspera*). This plant is reported by Maiden (p. 150) to be "administered in India in cases of dropsy." A condition which I take to be dropsy was thus described: "Suppose someone puts a certain bad leaf (the name of which my informant professed not to know) among some bananas and another person eats them, his belly becomes big just like a pregnant woman's and presently he dies." The word for this condition (*wagiug*) also means "pregnant."

Elephantiasis (*pu*) is not infrequent. There is medicine to relieve the pain in the early stages, but my informants did not know it. Afterwards "it is not painful, it only swells up and then we cannot make any medicine for it."

Epilepsy

I heard of one man who was subject to periodical attacks which would seem to be epileptic fits. They were described as follows: "He falls down on the ground, all his skin is tight, then he dies (*i.e.* becomes unconscious), plenty of white water comes up in his mouth. When he comes to life again he spits it out, he stays all right for a long time, then the sickness comes back again." The treatment is to make a mixture of the leaves of *karavetan* (a creeper) with lime and water. The leaves are rubbed over the man's body and he is given the water to drink.

Tuberculosis

The sickness *wapē'o*, which I take to be tuberculosis of the lung, is thus described: "The man is nothing but skin and bone, he cannot eat, he does nothing but spit, by and bye he spits blood, then he is all right for a little while, then he is ill again." It is thought to be caused by someone making "bad medicine" with the aid of aromatic plants or leaves which have been worn by the affected individual as ornaments. My informant had heard there was a treatment for it, but he did not know it.

Prevention of Sickness

Epidemics are thought to be caused by *urar* (spirits of the dead) who are angry with the people. Certain precautionary measures may be taken. The medicine used generally consists

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The medicine used generally consists
751 278 of a mixture of dried leaves, roots, etc. with the red powder called *oin* (iron oxide). Packages of this " medicine " are highly valued; not infrequently they have been obtained from the natives of another district and their owners are ignorant of the ingredients used. One such, in my collection, is intended to be rubbed over a person's eyes when he has to walk about at night; this is thought to prevent the *urar* from giving you the disease. Another method is to make a drink from the leaves of *gagĕ* (*Dryopteris pteroidea*); this must be used frequently throughout the time of sickness.

Convalescence

758 278 When a person is recovering after an illness, and is very thin and wasted, the leaves of *bubus*, squeezed into water to make a drink, are given to help him to "get fat quickly." There are also special leaves to be dipped in water and used to rub him down.

Miscellaneous

752 278 For the bite of a centipede, chew the root of *wapindi* (a tree) and with your mouth full bite at the place. Sprinkle lime on the leaves and press them on the joints at either side of the bite (*e.g.* if bitten on the forearm, press on the elbow and wrist). For the wound made by a sting-ray, rub the leaves on the place.

751 [824] To prevent sunstroke, while working in the taro garden, take the leaves of *iag* (*Coleus Blumei var.*), put them in half a coconut shell, fill it with water, and leave it lying in the sun. When you have finished working you must pour the contents of the coconut shell into the fire. To leave it where it is, or to empty it on the ground, will cause rain.

Summary

757 It will be seen that the natives of north Bougainville practise a variety of curative methods, their technique including the giving of medicine by the mouth; its application externally as we use ointment; the use of a suppository; the use of emetics; the application of counter-irritants: the application of heat in a form comparable to our poultice, and also of smoke; inhaling steam; sniffing aromatic plants; massage, manipulation and pressure. No treatment involving bleeding came to my notice. So far as I could ascertain they do not practise any form of surgery.

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Since several different plants are used for the same sickness, and the same plant often for conditions widely different in character, the sum of the actual medical knowledge possessed by these natives may be very small and it seems likely that most of their remedies work, if they work at all, solely by the power of suggestion. At the same time it is noteworthy that several of the comparatively small number of plants which could be identified from my pressed specimens are identical with those used for similar purposes in Australia or in India. Many of these have no particularly striking characteristics which would attract attention among the mass of green in the bush. These coincidences cannot well be the result of contact, and would seem too numerous to have come about by chance. Without analysis, for which large quantities are required, it is impossible to settle the question as to how many of these plants actually possess therapeutic value. It would be interesting to ascertain whether any of them are used for similar purposes in tropical Africa, but I have not been able to find any account of an African materia medica giving the necessary botanical identifications.

B. Blackwood.

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